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'Ballard, 17, gets life in prison in Lawler killing

By Claude Burrows
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When John Robert Ballard bludgeoned a 74-year-old man to death last December, he "reached out and touched death." For that, the 17-year-old Richmond youth was sentenced yesterday to life in prison.

It was the maximum penalty that could be imposed for Ballard's conviction in the same South-Richmond Circuit Court last month of first-degree murder in the slaying of former City Councilman J. Edward Lawler.

The slightly built youth sat silently between his two attorneys as Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Warren Von Schuch asked for the maximum penalty for an "incredibly cruel act."

When Ballard beat Lawler to death with the handle from bolt cutters on the night of Dec. 30, it was characterized as a particularly brutal crime, more so than if he had shot Lawler.

"It was a personal thing" to hit a man 17 times, "an orgy of violence," Von Schuch said. It was Von Schuch who talked of reaching out and touching death.

In imposing the sentence, Judge William E. Spain noted that Ballard would be eligible for parole in 15 years. "Who are we kidding when we say a person is sentenced to prison for life?" Spain commented.

During his trial six weeks ago, Ballard pleaded not guilty to capital murder, but admitted that he beat Lawler repeatedly during a robbery at the residence at 5011 Riverside Drive.

Ballard told of going to the home in search of money with his sister, Juanita Ballard, 18; Carl Simons, 26; and Timothy Dickenson, 20, while high on drugs and of his subsequent flight to Florida where he and his sister were apprehended by police.

Simons was sentenced by a jury to 60 years in prison on a conviction of first-degree murder. Ms. Ballard and Timothy Dickenson have yet to be tried.

During a pre-sentence hearing be-

fore Spain, defense attorneys Sterling Moore and Craig Cooley presented witnesses who characterized Ballard as a mixed-up kid with a history of emotional and learning disabilities.

Carole Sprinkle, a psychologist for the city schools, said she had worked with Ballard from March 1981 up to Dec. 14, 1982, two weeks before Lawler's slaying.

She said Ballard was "chronically anxious and insecure" and that his first solution to problems was to walk away. He had a lot of underlying anger that he tried to mask with a show of bravado and had a history of learning and emotional problems beginning in 1973 up through two years at Huguenot High School, she said.

He was fearful of people he perceived as having control over him, and without "help, guidance and support," it is possible that the same thing could happen again, she said.

Harry Webb Jr. said Ballard did some work for him and they became friends. He said he could not imagine Ballard being involved in a murder.

"I guess he was at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people," he said.

Moore asked Spain to consider sentencing Ballard to a number of years with a significant amount suspended so that the youth could get the kinds of help he needed. He noted that Ballard has shown remorse for his actions and, while in jail, attempted to commit suicide. He is a young man "who never really had a break," Moore said.

Spain said he had to consider the brutality involved in the slaying, the repeated blows to Lawler's head. He not only reached out and touched death that night, "he reveled in it," Spain said.

It was clear from testimony given at the hearing, Spain said, that given Ballard's personality and makeup, "it could happen again."

Cooley and Moore said after the sentencing that they would file an appeal to the Virginia Supreme Court.